DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 191 811 SP 016 410

AUTHOR Nivens, Maryruth K.
TITLE Handling Conflict and Stress (Women as their own worse enemies).
PUB DATE Nov 79
NOTE 13p.: Paper presented at Up the Managerial Ladder, a Conference for Women (Montgomery, AL, November 2, 1979).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Assertiveness; *Communication Skills; *Conflict Resolution; *Females; Managerial Occupations; *Organizational Communication; *Role Conflict; Self Esteem; Sex Stereotypes

ABSTRACT

Women in professional situations often do not handle conflict resolution as well as their male counterparts. Instead of using learned behaviors based on sex stereotypes, women should use assertive behaviors that communicate respect for themselves and others. Communication styles include: 1) constructive feedback, 2) levels of assertiveness, 3) active listening, 4) negotiation, and 5) compromise. (CJ)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED191811

HANDLING CONFLICT AND STRESS

(Women as their own worse enemies)

A Speech delivered at the
"Up the Managerial Ladder, a Conference for Women"
November 2, 1979
Auburn University at Montgomery
Montgomery, Alabama

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

Maryruth K. Nivens, Ph.D.
Associate Professor - Counselor Education
Auburn University at Montgomery

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Maryruth K. Nivens

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

SP016 410

HANDLING CONFLICT AND STRESS

(Women as their own worse enemies)

A Speech delivered at the "Up the Managerial Ladder, a Conference for Women", Nov. 2, 1979, AUM.

Growing up in a famous Western mining town, I observed some pronounced differences between male and female styles of conflict and stress management. Men in conflict would invite each other out into the streets, throw more than a few punches, then with their arms around each other return indoors for some liquid refreshment. I decided these male encounters were more on the order of skirmishes than battles. Women, on the other hand, would hold in their anger for months on end, seldom revealing its true source even when they could no longer contain it. Nor was the conflict over in a short time. Sometimes the interpersonal stress lasted until one of the parties died. These encounters seemed to me more like true wars, and I wondered, as a child, if the wrong sex were not sent into combat.

Women seemed more capable of making a conflict last, and wars <u>are</u> endless wastes whose true motivation is rarely made public.

However sexist these evaluations may sound, they are observable in the environment and represent learned behaviors. There are exceptions in both sexes but our socialization processes encourage these male and female stereotypes. Fortunately most learned behaviors can be modified and/or extinguished and I will address the remainder of my remarks to the relearning process.

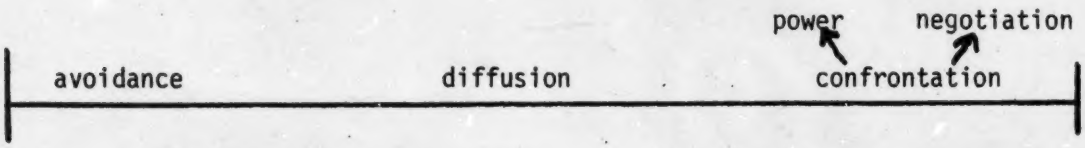
Many women have been socialized to "behave nicely", to develop a facade of passive behaviors which mask any anger we experience. Women's behaviors are controlled by words and phrases like "dumb broad", "bitch",

"Southern belle", "castrating female", "ding-a-ling", "Queen Bee". Our language is emotionally charged with words that help to create a mold, a way to be. Indeed, most of the insults directed toward or about men are merely reflections of their mothers' sexual behavior, as in "son of a bitch" and "bastard". Strongly negative female models have been reinforced and institutionalized through language and no matter how personally able an individual female may be, she struggles to but cannot avoid the negative connotations of the language in her environment.

The emotional power of words can be so intimidating that these sounds serve as agents of control which maneuver and limit women's conflect resolution strategies. Ironically this manipulation by language becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy whereby women do act ineffectively, are pushy, manipulative (especially with tears) or aggressive (hence castrating).

We, as women, need an understanding of how we contribute to the maintenance of our negative stereotypes--how we behave so that those of us under forty-five can be dismissed with the comment that "it must be that time of month" and those over forty-five can be discounted by the remark that "she's probably going through the change". Biology <u>is</u> destiny, even among managerial women, if we cannot effectively handle conflict.

Fantasize with me that you are coming down a hall from which there is no escape. You are about to meet that person with whom you are currently most in conflict. Keep in mind how you feel, what happens in terms of physical sensation, what you want to say or do as we consider some alternative ways of coping with conflict. Our model (Stepis, 1974) looks like this:



If during your fantasy you chose avoidance, you may have pretended that nothing was wrong by repressing your true feelings. Translated to the work setting that approach includes things like quitting your job, transferring, moving away, having a headache or other physical symptoms so that you could plead illness, taking longer lunch breaks, making medical appointments during business hours; and doing your work after hours or on weekends to have the office to yourself. Avoidance behavior contributes to the age old female stereotype of "Southern Belle" or "poor little ole me".

If diffusion were your choice, you used delaying tactics, letting the problem grow by refusing to deal with the issue. You rationalized, made excuses for yourself or the other party without checking the veracity of your rationalizations. You engaged in back biting to release your own feelings about the conflict to everyone except those involved. You confused the issue, dickering about minor details or perepheral concerns. You may have dredged up the past, talked about other past infractions in order to build your case, then assigned blame, seeing conflict as something to which you are subjected but certainly do not cause. The stereotypes for the diffusor are "dumb broad" or "ding-a-ling".

Moving on our continuum to the area of confrontation, we will examine two types of confrontation, power and negotiation. Power confrontations involve the use of physical force, bribery (as in the use of tears), providing favors (including sexual activity), pouting, and punishment. Punishment includes keeping score of wins and losses, inducing guilt and engaging in work slow downs. Power also involves manipulation, the undercutting of the other person's credibility with the rest of the staff, dealing with personality rather than issues. Power plays include demands

for special consideration. Statements like, "I don't have to work so I won't do such and so" or, "I'm a single parent or sole survivor or whatever" so that the other person seems to be taking unfair advantage. These and similar behaviors reflect the stereotypes of the "Queen Bee" and "bitch". Power confrontations generally cause hostility, anxiety and alienation in the loser and there is always a loser.

All of the previous behaviors in the categories of avoidance, diffusion and power confrontation might be described as short sighted goals. These short term, short sighted goals may make you feel better for a little while but, if you have really won the battle (rather than merely silenced your opponent), you have lost the war.

One primary difference between men and women in their approach to conflict resolution, as I see it, lies in this matter of short term, short sighted goals (often employed by women) versus long range plans (the usual male approach). This difference also seems apparent in the area of career choices; men as little boys plan careers. Females plan something to do until they are married to someone who has a career. Have you ever wondered why marriage is a career for only one of the partners? But that is an aside.

If we explore the negotiating aspect of confrontation, we see that one basic aspect of negotiation is one of diagnosing the nature of the problem, of being able to at least keep ourselves in hand by making our part of the interaction rational. Dr. Arne Russianoff, New York psycologist, believes that one reason women experience more stress in conflict situations than men is that women tend to catastrophize; to see every mistake as larger, more intense and of deeper significance than it is actually. To analyze a situation accurately is to approach it calmly.

The programmed relaxation exercises of Wolpe (1957) will be demonstrated later. Another procedure is to describe only the behavior within an interaction without ascribing motivation to other people. This assignation of motivation causes us to overreact or behave inappropirately under stress.

Several writers in the field of conflict management suggest that women tend to view their jobs less globially than do men. Many women take dead-end jobs because they already have the skills to do well in that particular job or they believe, initially, that their job is secondary to that of their spouse. Women who are unable or unwilling to move to another location may not examine their existing skills to determine if these talents could be utilized toward upward mobility in a career. This partitioning off of one's job, as sufficient in and of itself, while temporarily satisfying, finally becomes a source of conflict....especially when that job becomes a financial or emotional necessity and the woman plans to work until retirement age.

I have included in your packet a copy of an instrument, Diagnosing Organizational Behavior by Roger Harrison (1975) for you to read at a later date. I suggest you use this tool to help you locate some of the sources of conflict which may be affecting your career and your sense of self-worth on the job. Being aware of areas of conflict is often a first step in the correct diagnosis of the nature of a particular conflict.

According to Harrison the match between your values and those you observe in your organization indicates the ease with which you can enter into a psychological contract with that organization. When there is a "bad fit" your choices are 1) to try to change the organization, 2) to limit your involvement, or 3) to allow yourself to feel trapped. Entrapment has been identified as a primary source of conflict for many career women.

An accurate diagnosis, then, suggests the second skill in conflict resolution, initiation of action. You are aware from the enclosed handout of three forms of interpersonal response designated as passive, assertive and aggressive. These terms derive from a model by Pat Jabokowski and A. J. Lange (1976). Much of our previous discussion has focused on passive and aggressive behaviors, feelings and attitudes, although we did not use those labels. We will now discuss assertive behavior, the use of constructive feedback and the levels of assertiveness attached to this model of communication styles.

Feedback is a process by which you and I determine how things are in our world. If we did not have the expressions on the faces of our friends and family, if no one ever really told us anything, we would be locked into repeating old and inappropriate behaviors; until, finally, because we had no responses, we would become withdrawn, depressed and possibly even suicidal. For many of us, feedback is synonomous with combat and has not been a pleasant experience; but constructive feedback, while not always pleasant, is not combative but useable information.

Let me describe here some of the salient aspects of constructive feedback. 1) Feedback, to be constructive, must be timed. Try to describe a concern or issue a compliment as soon as possible. Feedback should be as close to the described event as possible. Of course, common sense indicates that if a robber enters your home tonight, you need not tell him how that makes you feel. 2) Useful feedback tells another person something over which the person has some control. You might say that you would like me better if I were taller, thinner, younger, and had black hair. My response to that is "too bad about you." I diet regularly, albeit unsuccessfully. I am not going to dye my hair and I can't do anything about those other two items. I may resent you for bringing my age and my height to my

attention in a negative way. 3) Useful feedback is information the listener may either choose to do something about or disregard. But given the feedback, the listener has a choice that was not available until you cared enough to share your thoughts and feelings. 4) The most useful feedback is concrete, specific, more a description of behavior than of guessing why something happened. Moreover, feedback, especially of a highly emotional nature to the listener, can be discredited unless you as a speaker make your messages congruent.Please don't smile and call me a bitch or frown and say how much my work has improved. I will be confused as to which signal merits a response. Mixed signals often destroy the entire feedback process. Finally check with your listener to be sure that the message sent was the message received. We perpetuate misunderstandings and disrupt communication with vague or misunderstood messages.

Assertiveness differs from passivity and aggression, both part and parcel of diffusion and avoidance, in that assertiveness opens up the possibility of increased dialog. Note that I said "increased dialog," not "guaranteed happy ending". Aggressiveness and passivity control the outcome of a given situation by shutting off the other person. Of the three approaches, assertiveness requires the most initial risk-taking behavior but carries with it a greater possibility of satisfaction with your part in an interaction. When one is effectively assertive there is no need to replay a given interaction, to wish you had done things differently.

To initiate a negotiating confrontation, we approach the other person with respect for that person as another visitor on this planet. We respect others even as we disagree with a particular behavior or decision.

Our statements reflect a position of self-respect as well as concern and are not accusatory. "I am disappointed that I was not promoted" is quite a different statement from "You treated me unfairly by promoting Jean." In being assertive, we own our feelings as in "I am disappointed." In initial or subsequent levels of assertiveness, we speak in the first person singular, always giving the other person some wiggle room. Without accusation, the listener need not become defensive and can explain or even apologize, if actually in error. Assertive statements are not, however, magic one-liners. The more our assertive statements match lingustically, our regular speech patterns, the more likely it is that this communication tool will work for us. Often a well phrased assertive statement allows the listener to respond in such a way that we can then proceed toward a conciliation.

Sometimes our first statement is not understood, either because our behavior is new, or the other person has chosen not to listen. We would then proceed to another middle level of assertiveness. This middle level includes a statement of how we feel or perceive the situation and a statement of what we want the other to do about the problem. "I feel disappointed that I was not promoted and you may be able to help me understand why I was passed over". Again we have taken steps to keep the level of defensiveness low for all participants in this interaction.

Should this middle level not generate a satisfactory response, we move into the third level of assertiveness with this type of statement; "I am disappointed and you could help me. If you do not wish to give me an explanation, I will make an appointment to discuss this tomorrow with Mrs. G." The third level of assertiveness repeats the initiator's original stance (I am disappointed) adds a request for assistance from the listener (You could help explain this) and incorporates a course of

action that the initiator is both willing and able to take (I will make an appointment to discuss this tomorrow with Mrs. G.) Unfortunately many of us begin at the last stage first. This leaves us nowhere to go when we make a threat that we didn't mean or our listener responds defensively due to the intensity of our approach. And there goes our credibility!

The skills of active listening will be extremely helpful if we elect to engage in the negotiating form of confrontation. Hear not just the tone of voice but also the other persons words so that we can restate in condensed form what we hear. Reiteration prevents further misunderstandings. Both participants may move toward solution during the interchange by either 1) collaborating, working jointly once you both discover more points of agreement than disagreement; 2) replacing the goal of winning with the goal of problem solving; 3) compromising, making concessions without totally abandoning either person's values or major premises; or 4) accommodating, absorbing some of the other person's ideas as one's own then enlarging and expanding to other areas of agreement.

Would you now take a few moments and re-do your original fantasy? Do you see alternatives?

Finally you may want to remember that conflict is a challenge, not an annoyance or a contest. Leaping to conclusions is not a healthful form of exercise and the best skills of conflict resolution may be having the good sense to be aware of the complexity of human interaction.

In closing let me quote George Bernard Shaw from an 1891 essay on women:

> "If you believe that the natural place of women is the kitchen and the nursery, you are like English children who consider the cage

as the natural habitat of the parrot, having seen one nowhere else. Oh, there may be docile parrots who are content to remain in the cage provided there is enough hemp corn and water, and there are those missionary parrots who feel it is their lot in life to keep a family contented by whistling Pretty Polly--but the only parrot worth anyone's genuine concern is the parrot who demands to be released from the cage as a condition of becoming agreeable."

The business world is not a high school dance. We are no longer little girls. We can handle our own conflicts. So let's not get all dressed up, professionally speaking, and sit on the sidelines waiting for our male colleagues to ask us to tango.

REFERENCES

Harrison, Roger. Diagnosing Organization Ideology, The 1975 Annual Handbook for Group Facilitators, Pfeiffer & Jones (Eds.), University Assoc. Publishers, Inc., LaJolla, California, 1975, pgs. 101-107.

Lange, A. J. & Jakubowski, P. Responsible Assertive Behavior, Research Press, Champaign, Illinois, 1976.

Stepis, Joan A. Conflict-Resolution Strategies, The 1974 Annual Handbook for Group Facilitators, Pfeiffer & Jones, (Eds.), University Assoc. Publishers, Inc., LaJolla, California, 1974, pgs. 139-41.